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What I do all day: Professor spends 5 hours a week teaching class, but here's how it's a 55-hour week

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WHAT I DO ALL DAY PROFESSOR SPENDS 5 HOURS A WEEK TEACHING CLASS, BUT HERE'S HOW IT'S A 55-HOUR WEEK

ONE Saturday morning several years ago I found myself in the basement of the University of Virginia's computing center, picking up a map I had sent to the mainframe computer the evening before. I had my son, Nate, who was about 6, with me. The place was deserted, it being 9:30 or so on a beautiful football Saturday. What kind of person would go to the computing center at such a time?

It turned out that there was one other person there. It was the dean of the faculty, an internationally renowned theoretical physicist (picking up his printout of something probably a little more complicated than my maps of Arkansas and South Carolina), an extraordinarily friendly man.

Kneeling to talk to my shy son, he asked Nate if he would like to be a historian like his dad when he grew up. Nate solemnly shook his head no. The dean got him to explain. ``Because,'' Nate announced, ``it would be too embarrassing and too boring.'' I smiled weakly, a bit daunted to find out what my son really thought of me.

Later I gently queried Nate without trying to make the truthful young scamp feel bad about his honest feelings: ``What did you mean about my work being embarrassing and boring?'' I asked, in as fatherly a tone as I could muster. ``It's embarrassing when you have to stand up in front of all those people and boring when you have to sit in your study all by yourself all day,'' he informed me.

Nate had come with me to lecture one day. I had pictured him swelling with pride as he saw people in cool clothes and hip haircuts actually writing down what I said. It had turned out, instead, that he was blushing deep down inside the whole time that his dad stood up in front of all those people. I had also pictured him filled with respect as I labored away on my computer at home, trying to build a solid future for him and his new baby sister, Hannah. Instead, he pictured me as bored in there, an automaton staring at a gray screen that didn't even show cartoons, clattering away.

Over the years, I've come to realize that Nate was expressing the feelings of many people. In the eyes of most folks, a professor either portentously and pompously lectures people from a narrow perch of specialized knowledge or has a nose stuck in a dusty volume, oblivious to the real world outside.

We see this picture reproduced in recent accounts of the ways professors spend their time. What do we do with all that time when we're not pontificating? Surely it can't take that long to write the lectures we deliver. Surely there can't be that many books in our fields worth reading.

The only logical solution that some people can draw is that we must be goofing off, or, just as bad, doing ``research.'' That word conjures up images of a mad scientist in the basement or a nervous twit poring over something like an elaborate stamp collection in the attic. In either case, research is something antisocial, something detached from real education.

Although I teach about 500 undergraduates and 20 graduate students each year, I spend, just as the newspapers charge, a small fraction of my time in front of classrooms: on average, I'd say, about five hours a week. That's not much. Maybe an honest reckoning would help clarify just what it is that professors actually do. I understand where this question comes from. Professors, like the students around whom we structure our lives, don't follow the same rhythms and schedules of most people. People in the academy, whatever their age, tend to follow unusual hours, work in cycles of desperately hard labor and periods of less desperation, tend to work in places other than a central office, tend to spend considerable amounts of time alone or in intense conversation with a few people, tend not to work in terms reflected in billable hours or tightly scheduled appointments. The fruits of our labor are not always visible to the casual observer. For that reason, and for the reason that intellectual work has usually been suspect in the United States, professors have come under attack and derision lately.

So what do I do in addition to teaching two large lecture courses and two discussion courses each average year? First of all, I talk to about 20 students a week in office hours, during appointments, or on the phone (often, my family points out with grim humor, at dinner time, the kids' bedtime or my own bedtime). I talk with a constantly changing series of people with a wide range of problems and requests. I feel like a combination psychologist, bureaucrat, salesman, teacher of English 101, guidance counselor - occasionally, even a historian. I enjoy office hours and find that I'm usually busy the whole time. In fact, I can't get any other work done if I stay in my office, so I tend not to be there unless I'm scheduled to be there. I sometimes feel a little guilty about that, to be honest, but I always find time for any student who wants to talk with me.

The much-maligned ``committee work'' takes a considerable amount of my time. The very name makes it sound like a bunch of gray and

graying drones shuffling paper and cold coffee around as they discuss something without consequence or interest. Granted, some committee work is like that, as it is in any group in which labor and responsibility are shared. But the cost is worth the reward, for one of the best things about academic life is that so much of it is done democratically, without a cumbersome administrative superstructure. People take turns running the most important parts of the university: its hiring, its promotion and tenure, its grievances - things that full-time staff do in organizations a fraction of the size of a university.

I serve on five or six committees. Those committees deal with everything from overseeing research policy for the university to overseeing all our information technology, from reviewing proposals for new degree programs to choosing the recipients of newly created chairs in teaching excellence, from managing the large and complicated graduate program in the history department to advising the library. I spend about three hours a week on committee work though that amount can easily become 10 or 12 hours when we're engaged in a major hiring decision. This work is largely invisible, but it is essential. It tends, in my experience, to be done quite conscientiously.

My time is absorbed to some extent as well in talking to various groups outside the classroom. I've lectured to the Rotary and to general contractors, to investment bankers and retired people, to groups of secondary school teachers and museum professionals, to alumni and parents of students. I talk quite a bit to student groups, ranging from first-years to those discussing the honor system to those who are being inducted into honor societies. These add up to about an hour a week's worth, I imagine, on average.

OK - we've accounted for five hours in the classroom in an average week of an average semester, 10 hours in private conversation with students. I spend another three hours preparing for lectures, another five hours preparing for undergraduate or graduate discussion classes, another hour (and a lot more in some weeks) writing letters of recommendation for undergrads eager to get into law school, medical school, graduate school, the Peace Corps, a postdoc, a position teaching English in Japan, wherever. I read student papers and the like for, say, an average of another six hours a week. Committee work takes three and public talks another one. That adds up, if I'm not mistaken, to 34 hours. If, as UVa professors claim, we put in an average of 50 hours a week, where are the other 16?

Although it appears not to be politically correct to say so, I am proud that I spend considerable time with my graduate students. I know the average graduate student for six years, not the two or three semesters I have with even those undergraduates I come to know best. Those grad students share my passion for what I'm so curious about. They want to know everything I know and then go beyond it. They are smart, dedicated people who are sacrificing all kinds of earning potential with their fancy degrees and GPAs to come here and study. Their livelihoods depend on me in a way undergrads' do not. The job market for professors is, as you all know, incredibly brutal - harder than almost any field in the so-called ``real world.'' Where else are there 300 applicants with Ph.D.s from the best schools in the world fighting for a job from which they may very well be fired in six years if they don't come up with work that can hold its own with any produced in the world?

Those graduate students and I write books together. More accurately, each one of them writes a book and I tear it apart, several times, until it is good enough, we hope, to put them on the top of the pile of 300 job applicants. As you can imagine, that takes a lot of time, effort, and engagement.

But a lot of our time together is spent in teaching undergraduates. In fact, I know I would not be standing here today had not the teaching assistants in my class on the ``History of the United States since 1865'' done such a wonderful job. I do organize the course, select the readings, give the lectures, coordinate the questions asked in discussion and take responsibility for the course as a whole. TAs, though, lead the discussions, suggest questions for the papers and exams, and then grade them. They are my partners, my allies, my friends.

Undergraduate education at UVa would be much impoverished without graduate students. I know that TAs get a bad rap. They are often cited as examples of what's wrong with higher education; the number of sections taught by TAs counted as demerits in recent newspaper stories. I understand that it is a very real problem when TAs do not speak English adequately, or when they are thrown into courses they are not ready to teach, or when they are abandoned by the professor. I also know, however, from the experience of having worked with more than 60 TAs over the last 13 years, that graduate students make energetic, concerned, generous and knowledgeable teachers - all for about the minimum wage.

In my opinion, the most effective money we spend on undergraduate education at Virginia is spent on graduate fellowships to bring the best young scholars to Charlottesville and on groups such as the Teaching Resource Center to help them become the best teachers they can be. I see no other way to teach the number of people who want to take our courses. Virtually every course in U.S. history at UVa is full to overflowing and it is only with TAs that we can teach the students who want to know what we have to teach.

We cannot go back to the days when faculty taught 30 students in each class, as appealing as that might sound on the surface. I think there is a kind of excitement in having several people as the teachers in a class, an electricity. We would do best, I believe, to recognize that and embrace it, to accept and celebrate our graduate students as key people at the university.

Therefore, I count the six hours a week I spend with graduate students time well spent. Together with the 34 hours I tallied before, they bring me up to the standard 40-hour workweek. But there's a problem: I've not created a single bit of knowledge in those 40 hours. I've only conveyed what I've learned from other people. That's a useful job, one I am happy to perform, but it's not the only reason we have places such as UVa. Here, we are given the resources and the expectations to add to what is being taught not only in my own classroom but in classrooms across the country.

Thus, I spend the other 10 to 15 hours a week I work - often in the evenings or on the mornings of weekends or early in the mornings of

weekdays - working on my contributions to the larger process of teaching. Part of that time is spent on the national equivalent of committee work: refereeing manuscripts for journals and presses, writing letters for tenure and promotion at other institutions. Academic work is as close to a meritorcracy as we come in America. We are constantly being evaluated by our peers, held to public account for what we publish. It's a rigorous discipline, democratic but time-consuming.

I have several publishing projects of my own going right now: a textbook that tries to tell the story of the American people in a new way, the Oxford Book of the American South with which I hope to reach an audience beyond classrooms and a very large research project that is trying to create one of the first books to take advantage of the exciting developments of the so-called electronic superhighway. All of these projects influence the way I teach every day. And virtually all of the work on them is done in what appears to people outside academic life as the ``spare time'' of weekends, breaks, summers and leaves.

So you see that I'm constantly shifting among several jobs: a teacher, an administrator, an entrepreneur, an employer, an entertainer, an ambassador, a scholar. It adds up to about 55 hours, a fairly full workweek. If I don't like what I'm doing at any one time, it doesn't matter because I'll be doing something else, apparently only tangentially related, the next hour.

And yet it is of a piece. While I often feel harried, I don't feel schizophrenic. Each of these activities has a lot in common with the others. They are generally done in collaboration with other people. Sometimes that collaboration is a discussion with a single person. Sometimes the work is a discussion with 10 or 12 people, letting everyone solo but keeping the tempo sharp, bringing it all together at the end. Sometimes the work is a collaboration with 400 people, playing the room, reading the mood, trying to channel all that attention and energy in a way that makes a lecture a common experience. And sometimes my work is taking place without my immediate knowledge. It might be a former TA, now teaching her own course in Massachusetts or South Carolina, trying out an idea we cooked up together; it might be a class at a law school or liberal arts college somewhere else in the state or country discussing something I've written; it might be an elderly reader at a public library picking up my book and finding some connection with his own life there.

Translation, you see, is the common denominator in what professors do all day. We translate from a field of knowledge to those who want to know something about it. In my case, I translate between the people of today and the people from the past of the United States, especially those of the South. Other professors translate physics, or business, or languages or other cultures. We all live in at least two worlds. One of those worlds is a world of ideas, of print and numbers, a world almost limitless and impossible to master, growing every time we turn our backs.

The other world is the immediate and human world of classes, committees, office hours, deadlines, budgets, advising. Without being a full citizen of both worlds, an active participant in both worlds, we are diminished, our ability to teach diminished.

The dichotomy between teaching and research is no dichotomy at all if we understand that a professor constantly journeys back and forth between two worlds. Such work is not as embarrassing or boring as one might think.

By Edward Ayers, the Hugh P. Kelly Professor of History at the University of Virginia, was named Teacher of the Year by UVa's chapter of Phi Eta Sigma, the national freshman honor society. This article was adapted from a talk delivered Oct. 31, 1993, when he accepted the award.